

Ont Ministry of Colleges and Universities
Statements and speeches

STATEMENT BY: HON. THOMAS WELLS
MINISTER OF EDUCATION

RE: RELEASE OF INTERFACE
RESEARCH REPORTS

DATE: TUESDAY, JANUARY 18, 1977

We are very pleased to release today the full reports of four research projects that have been completed as part of the government's review of policies that affect the preparation and transition of students from the secondary schools to the universities and the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology.

The four reports, collectively called the Interface Study, cover much ground and contain a wealth of material. Each study has its own focus:

(1) The first is an opinion survey that reports on the attitudes and perceptions of educators, the public and students concerning the roles and effectiveness of our secondary schools, colleges and universities.

(2) The second reports on the actual levels of achievement of students in several dozen Ontario secondary schools who were completing their final year and planning to enter college or university.

(3) The third analyzes the material taught in courses in the two senior years of secondary schools and the first two years of college and university programs, and identifies gaps and duplications across the interface.

(4) The fourth report is, in effect, a combined analysis of the findings of the research into student achievement and course content, in an effort to identify gaps and duplications in programs and student knowledge.

We are particularly pleased that the researchers were able to complete their work in the eleven and a half months we could allow. The work on student achievement and the analysis of secondary and post-secondary courses was especially difficult in such a short time.

The research teams assembled by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and by Queen's University deserve special mention -- because they are examples of how well the education community can itself respond quickly and well to the need for practical educational research. It is encouraging to note that educational researchers in Ontario are more and more able to respond in this way.

As far as the secondary schools are concerned, there is both good news and bad news in the results of this research.

The survey of "public perceptions" serves as an interesting backdrop to the other three research projects. While this survey reports solely on the opinions of people -- as compared to hard factual data-- there are some very clear messages that emerge.

For example, the public feels that academic skills in the schools are very important, of course. But people also see other important goals for the high schools -- such as the development of values, of individual and social responsibility, and of positive attitudes to learning -- and feel that the schools are doing a good job in these areas.

However, this survey once again confirms that many people believe that overall academic achievement in our high schools has declined over the past few years, especially in language skills.

In effect, we're being told that more is expected by way of basic academic skills, but also that we should not go back to a rigid system concerned only with academic performance and little else.

Grade 13 is seen by everyone to be a valuable year, and test results show that it does substantially improve language achievement. Also, just as in the days of the Province-wide Grade 13 exams, success in Grade 13 continues to be a reliable predictor of success in college and university.

The research confirms general support for a greater degree of course standardization in the high schools, and for a core program. The research conducted by the Queen's University team, which examined course content, found some instances of significant variance in course content from school to school -- confirming the need for some additional measure of common core curriculum than has been the case in recent years.

There is general criticism from students, teachers and the public about the lack of external testing and evaluation of student achievement in the high schools. At the same time, however, most groups would not want standardized tests to be used to the exclusion of teacher evaluation.

The basic point here is that there is a consensus feeling that evaluation should not rest solely on what the teachers or the school says about a student's achievement; this is very important, but there should be some kinds of additional measurements of achievement.

Dr. Ross Traub of OISE, who was the principal researcher on the study of student achievement, concludes that marking standards in our secondary schools are not in the state of chaos which some people believe exists. He says that "test scores indicate a situation very far from chaotic."

Nonetheless, it certainly appears that marking standards do vary from school to school, enough to affect the chances of a student being admitted to a limited enrolment course at the post-secondary level.

This is definitely something that concerns us greatly and it is a matter that is being studied carefully by the special committee which we recently established to find ways of improving the evaluation of student achievement.

Insofar as the high school curriculum itself is concerned, these research reports reveal some interesting patterns.

Performance in Grade 13 mathematics has held up well over recent years, but the achievement in General Mathematics at Grade 12 is weak and must be strengthened. We have already moved strongly on this, in fact, by making Mathematics a required subject in Grades 9 and 10, and by insisting on a stronger core program in Mathematics.

The exaggerated charges of "illiteracy" that are so often heard are not borne out by this research. Most students reach what the researchers consider to be a post-secondary "survival level", and their writing is free of major grammatical errors. At the same time, there are too many minor errors and the quality of language appears to be pedestrian.

These are merely a few random observations on the findings of these four studies. My preliminary review of the material convinces me that there is a great deal of helpful information contained in the reports, and many more conclusions than I could possibly mention here today.

It is obvious that many of the findings of this very extensive research are no surprise to us, in terms of both the strengths and weaknesses of the secondary school system. In fact we have already begun to respond to a number of the problems which this research has underlined.

The Ministry of Education has already created a mandatory core of basic subjects in the secondary schools. We have recently adopted a new curriculum guideline policy that will spell out within each subject a much larger common core of subject matter. These measures will lead to more uniform course content, and a better grounding in the basics of each subject for all students.

We are also seriously studying ways to improve the evaluation of student performance, and reporting student achievement to parents. The special committee which I mentioned a moment ago has been given the task of coming up with a specific plan of action in these areas, and I expect some initial recommendations from the committee this Spring as to what direction the Province should take. Certainly these research reports will be of considerable value and assistance to this committee.

All of these research reports will be given widespread distribution throughout the Province, because we want the full input of all interested groups and individuals. The Ministry of Education will be sending the reports to all school trustee and teacher organizations, to parents' groups, and to school boards.

Copies will also be provided to other interested groups, such as Ontario Chambers of Commerce and the Ontario Federation of Labour.

All such groups are being asked to submit comments or briefs by the end of March, in order that we might have full benefit of their advice and suggestions.

By that time we will have established a strong Policy Review Committee -- made up of a balance between teachers, trustees, school board officials and Ministry officials -- to review the briefs and advise on further action that is required.

I said that these reports contain good news and bad news. Most definitely they should not be viewed as a sweeping condemnation of the Ontario secondary school system. Those who will take the time to read the reports and summaries will find that there is more here to make us proud of our schools than ashamed. In general, our schools have done an excellent job of responding to the changing needs of students in recent years.

We are not under any illusions, however. These reports represent tough realistic research of the type that must be done if we are to refine and improve our system in the best way possible.

We have already made some very significant changes to the secondary school program in recent months, very much in line with some of the conclusions put forward in these research studies.

It is our strong expectation that these four reports, supplemented by the briefs received from interested organizations, will form the basis of any future action, so that any changes made are clearly in the best interests of the students.